



**Thursday, May 05, 2005**

## **ON THE HILL**

### **2. APPROPRIATIONS**

#### **Interior bill has nothing for new land acquisitions**

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For the second consecutive year, the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee yesterday voted to zero out new funding for Interior Department and Forest Service land acquisition projects.

Conservationists were severely disappointed by the move, part of a \$26.2 billion spending bill for fiscal year 2006, and pledged to redouble lobbying efforts in the Senate to get some of the cuts for land acquisition and the Land and Water Conservation Fund restored. The subcommittee passed the bill, which also includes funding for the U.S. EPA, by voice vote yesterday ([see related story](#)).

Subcommittee Chairman Charles Taylor (R-N.C.) has been an ardent opponent of federal land acquisition programs in recent years, and the proposed budget is sure to please other Republicans in Congress who feel the federal government already has too much land.

"The federal government owns one third of all the land in the United States, which makes it land-rich and cash-poor in today's budget climate," said Brian Kennedy, spokesman for House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo (R-Calif.). "The appropriators did the right thing by zeroing out

funds for new land acquisition. When you consider the fact that Uncle Sam is a terrible steward of land it does own, maybe they should have had an auction."

The subcommittee included \$43 million for LWCF, enough to fund administrative costs, some land exchanges and emergency acquisitions, but no new planned projects for FY '06. Although the panel passed a bill that provided zero dollars for new LWCF projects last year, \$255 million was eventually included in the omnibus FY '05 spending bill for land acquisition.

Conservation groups, already upset the Bush administration asked for a decrease in land acquisition projects this year to \$145 million, hope the Senate can restore some of the money. The administration had already asked to zero out the National Park Service's stateside grant program, which accounted for \$90 million of last year's \$255 million land acquisition budget.

"It's a big mess," said Tom St. Hilaire, executive director of Americans for Our Heritage and Recreation. "The Senate may be our only saving grace this year."

St. Hilaire accused House members of not standing up to Taylor to save land acquisition and preservation projects in their districts. "Chairman Taylor just does not like land acquisition at the federal or local level and none of the other members are holding him accountable," he said. "At some point they need to hold him accountable for that."

The decision to zero out new land acquisition projects is part of a larger effort by Western Republicans to reduce the amount of land held in the federal portfolio.

Rep. Chris Cannon (R-Utah) has introduced a bill ([H.R. 1370](#)) that would require the federal government to conduct an inventory of its approximately 670 million acres of land and identify "surplus and unneeded" parcels for potential sale. And Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) has introduced legislation ([H.R. 1235](#)) that would create a system under which any federal land acquisition over 100 acres in Western states would have to be offset by a corresponding sale of land of equal or greater value.

## **Interior agencies, Forest Service**

Continuing another subcommittee trend, the panel increased the operations budget for the National Park Service for FY '06, allotting \$1.8 billion, \$20 million above the Bush administration's request and \$71 million over FY '05. Ranking member Norm Dicks (D-Wash.) noted that for the first time, the panel was able to provide for NPS fixed costs such as pay increases in the subcommittee mark.

However, the overall allocation for the Park Service is down \$137 million from last year to \$2.2 billion. The panel also provided \$444 million for NPS backlog maintenance, well below the \$1.1 billion the administration requested as part of its highly publicized effort to devote nearly \$5 billion over 5 years to fund the backlog.

For other Interior agencies, Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service would receive modest cuts under the subcommittee mark. BLM would receive \$1.8 billion, a \$62 million decrease from FY '05, while FWS would receive \$1.3 billion, a \$26 million decrease from last year.

As expected, the Forest Service took a major hit with a proposed \$499 million decrease below FY '05, but at \$4.2 billion, that is \$182 million above the Bush administration's request. The bill would include \$128 million for agency forest health initiatives and \$76 million for state fire assistance grants. The administration had requested \$50 million for the grants.

Forest Service hazardous fuels reduction would receive \$492 million, even with the administration's request and a \$30 million increase over the FY '05 enacted level.

The subcommittee substantially increased the administration's request for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program, allotting \$230 million for PILT, long a favorite of Western lawmakers who complain the federal government's large landholdings limit the ability of cities and counties to collect tax revenue that fund civic priorities such as education. PILT received \$227 million in FY '05, but the administration requested only \$200 million.

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